

Girl Friends

by Sandra Rouse

Two women grab a table near a window in a coffee shop. Outside, the sky is the color of dulled aluminum. It is early spring and pollen assaults the air with a tint of sulfur. Inside, breathing the warm sweet air of pastries, they have arrived for a respite from whatever is floating around outside. They have ordered skinny lattes knowing they will feel lighter when they leave.

"Ahh," Myra sings after her first sip. She leans back on the wooden chair and stuffs her hands inside her pockets until she finds the fold of her belly. Heat radiating under her sweatshirt reminds her of what she camouflages. She pulls her cell phone from her pocket and powers it off before dropping it into the canvas bag on the floor beside her chair. *If the U.S. Marines call, it will be bad news. This way they will not reach her.*

Candace fiddles around with her coffee in one hand, and in the other she struggles with her bag and cell phone. Her hand shakes from the weight of the steaming mug. At the last minute, the coffee tops the edge and puddles under the cup as it touches down. "I'm such a mess. I need a project," Candace says. "My nerves are shot. The housing market is dead and it's killing me." She slings her Coach bag over the back of her chair and places her sleek smart phone on the table just to the right of the line of coffee at the base of her cup.

"Your timing is perfect," Myra says. Candace's strawberry blonde hair runs between the colors of cantaloupe and blood-orange. Today it's cantaloupe. "That really is your best color." Myra nods with approval toward Candace's chest. She's wearing a lime green camisole under a black suit blazer. Myra lives in jeans and sweats, the color of unbleached sand or pewter or sometimes ocean blue like her eyes.

Their voices mirror relief to one another. Coming together over coffee they remind the other of who they really are but occasionally lose sight of. A healthy recalibration. They have

talked about perimenopause. They have compared notes on erratic periods, weight gain, sleeplessness, and sweaty necks. They are not pregnant. They are grateful that ambulating heat waves do not occur in their sleep at night. Yet. They know it will come. Somehow complaining of such things, 'the change' whispered by their mothers, is exciting. Not knowing exactly when or how to prepare or how this will happen infuses a future mystery to their lives.

"So what's the project this time?"

Occasionally, Myra helps Candace clean house when a seller who has left town leaves everything in tact and a potential buyer wants a viewing immediately. They de-clutter and rearrange furniture to Restoration Hardware standards in a matter of two hours. Myra is hoping it's not furniture moving today. She hopes Candace comes up with something better.

"I have a transfer and his wife coming in tomorrow. They are desperate to find a house," Candace says. "There's nothing on the market right now for them. But I'm going to create one. I have Jack to thank."

"Mother and son business," Myra says. "I hope you gave him a big thank you hug. Boys need that as much as we do." The muscles around Candace's mouth take a perceptible downward turn. She checks her watch.

"I have to take him back to the neurologist today after school. I can't forget." Her son is still having short-term memory problems four months after cracking up his dad's Jaguar.

In walk a pair of women with a toddler who is pressing a Nerf football against his dimpled cheek. Myra scans their parade into the cafe. The women are thin with boy hips, donning tennis skirts and matching shoes the color of zinc oxide. One parks her red vinyl tote on a table behind Candace, and loops her hair behind both ears as if she's ready for combat. Her eyes are electric with energy and she scans the place scoping out some strategy. The other woman places an order and talks with the cashier while her ponytail

bobs agreeably. The toddler drops the football and heads for the china mug display shelf.

Myra doesn't recognize them personally but in this suburb she sees women like these driving around, back and forth from home to school to grocery store. There is a trend toward large broods, four or more, among these ex-lawyers, -dentists, -financial planners. They know about birth control. What happened to that? She thinks they are crazy, what these young women are doing to themselves. What must they think when they see foreclosure signs? The signs might as well be shouting, "Blind Curve." Life is dangerous. Her own son, not yet 20 years old, threw her a curve by enlisting in the U. S. Marine Corps right out of high school. Jack, Candace's son, threw another by missing the curve in the road.

"Okay, so what do you have in mind?" Myra asks, lassoing her thoughts back to why she is here in this cafe today.

"Right now it's an idea, this close to action." Candace pinches her thumb and index finger together to show Myra how close.

"Let me guess. You actually don't have a real estate project. You're thinking about going back to school for a PhD? In geology, the study of old rocks." With two fingers Myra traces the smile lines on both sides of her mouth. She's in the habit of cheering up Candace.

"Not bad," Candace laughs. The freckles on her face flush to a deep rust, dark against her luminous pink skin. "No, I really am stuck with real estate."

"Harrison, over here!"

Myra's attention returns to the action behind Candace. The one doing the pleading is under the table. She is no doubt the mother. She tries to entice the boy with plastic dinosaurs that she has so neatly lined up. He takes the bait. Miraculously, he leaves the mugs intact. *He ought to be on a leash in a place like this.* One chunky hand opens and grabs the thick rubber neck of Tyrannosaurus Rex, and *what was the other one with the spiky tail called anyway? Her son had hands like that. Now he wraps them*

around a rifle or metal detector in Afghanistan. At least that's what she sees in bed at night in her movie-reel mind.

"I want you to hear what happened last night." Candace's voice is a tad loud like the way she talks on her cell phone. "On YouTube. At 2am." Myra winces but gives her full attention. "I caught Jack on iChat. He and his friends were talking about a video that Mickey Marlowe put up. You know, Geoff's son?"

Myra leans closer to the windowsill next to their table. Wiping her index finger on the ledge she clears a path of dust and reveals a layer of mildew. Their homes cannot escape these grains shot on invisible zephyrs every spring from pine trees. Yellow powder fills the interstices of sofa fabric, lays on the tops of tables, collects under fingernails and frosts the tips of eyelashes. She remembers Candace telling her after Kay's suicide last fall that Geoff Marlowe shipped the boy up north with relatives. His senior year.

"He was in Jack's class, right?"

"That's him. The boys still keep in touch. Mickey hates it up there. In this video, he goes on a rampage about his life." Candace sits back as if to invite Myra's input. "Geoff knows less about Mickey than Jack does."

"I was in that boat; still am. We've talked about that," Myra says watching the boy under the table dance his paleontology collection on the floor. *Does the mother dream of making him a scientist?*

"But this is dangerous. It can't wait. I'm sure Geoff hasn't a clue about YouTube. This is where we come in."

"We do?" Myra senses something uncomfortable, not the usual real estate job.

"Honestly, this is about Mickey. He needs a father. Geoff has to sell his house and move up north to be with his son."

"Candace, houses aren't selling right now in case you haven't noticed!" Myra realizes that since Jack's accident Candace needs help focusing.

"I have a solid client, a transfer. And he wants that neighborhood and those schools."

"Are there any houses for sale in that neighborhood now?" Myra takes a risk asking this obvious question; that she might set off Candace like a firecracker. Her stomach presses hard against the drawstring band of her sweatpants.

"There will be. Geoff is the perfect candidate. He's a friend. I'm going to do this without commission. Once he understands about Mickey, he'll agree." As Candace's voice lowers, Myra feels something odd, like the cafe door has begun to seal shut. It is the trapped feeling she has every night sitting in front of the television with her husband, Richard. Right about now he is turning it on to watch the late afternoon news that runs interminably until midnight. On the wall next to the television, he has mounted a National Geographic map of Afghanistan.

"What if Geoff disagrees? He has a job here. Not up there. And, how can you represent the buyer and the seller?" Myra hears fake confidence in her voice and knows Candace hears it, too.

"That's easy. I can get another agent to deal with the transfer. First I need to get inside the house. Get a picture to come up with a fair price. I want to do that without Geoff. Then I'll show him the package: the market value and the road back to Mickey."

"Isn't there a minor problem of getting into Geoff's house?"

"I have a key. Kay and I exchanged keys years ago after she locked herself out once."

"You have got to be kidding. You're serious about this?"

"I need your help."

"Absolutely not. I don't know Geoff. I never knew Kay. I don't think this is a good idea. It's illegal to enter without permission."

"Geoff wouldn't do anything about that. He's a friend."

"Then what do you need me for?"

"Protection against the neighbors. They might suspect something if they see a stranger going into the house. But together"

"We look like cleaning ladies?"

"Exactly." Candace blinks her eyes repeatedly and bows her head to sip her coffee. Her neck and cheeks bloom red.

Myra meant it as a joke. But she sees Candace is very sensitive today. She's got to be careful in how she derails this project without hurting her girl friend's feelings. Candace looks away from Myra toward the mug display.

"Give that back!" Candace shouts leaping from her chair. Myra's view is blocked at first. Then Candace moves to the side and Myra spots her cell phone in the chunky hand that Candace pries open. A brief moment of silence cascades and closes down the conversational din in the shop. The boy moves away from Candace and his fat cheeks swell with the flush of a temper tantrum. He explodes in protest. Candace tries moving closer but the mother intervenes.

"Who do you think you are?" she says turning on Candace. Myra can read the mother's lips over the chaos and deafening wail. Candace stands her ground in silence. She looks nervous cupping the phone in both hands.

"Do I know you?" It's Ponytail moving around the empty table picking up the discarded toys.

"No, I don't think so," Myra replies. It feels odd, this staring game they've been playing. *Or, the woman actually thinks she's seen her somewhere. Because she looks like a generic woman of indeterminate age standing by the roadside, fading under pine pollen and watching new mothers spin by while driving their vehicles armed with bumper stickers about honor students, every seat belt latched, and the rear trunk encased in dust except where a small finger has traced 'wash me?'*

What Myra does recognize is the boy's stubbornness and his refusal to go back into the cave with the dinosaurs. She knows he wants the light of day. The mother is in the thick of battle picking

her angle of attack. As she moves in closer he kicks with solid legs warding off her threats. She steps back in a widening radius. Even the baristas have stopped their churning and slamming of coffee machines. Everyone is watching in stop motion while the screaming boy holds center of attention.

Ponytail makes eye contact with Myra again. She nods her head toward her right shoulder in a sign of disappointment or maybe defeat. They have come, these mothers, to have their hour of fun, their conversation, and their support. Myra nods back in empathy.

"There are good days and bad days," Myra manages to say above the confusion.

Ponytail leans in toward Myra. "'We are the bows from which our children as living arrows are sent forth.' I heard that once, something like that."

Myra smiles, not sure what to say. The mother carries the boy horizontally out the door. Her friend follows with the bag of toys. Candace hands over the cell phone to Myra. It's sticky with sugar and she drops it into her bag.

"I've got to pick up something for dinner," she says to Candace who has already slung her bag over her shoulder. With sunglasses over her eyes, Myra smiles at the anon-glam look sans crow's feet. The cafe has resumed without a loss of ambience. It's the perfect time to leave.

Outside, the air is cool but humid. Myra's nose is itchy. The sun never made a full showing and now the light through the haze is gray. Silver green tips on the Bradford Pears hint at the white fruitless blooms to follow. Candace waves her fingers in the air in front of her face as she heads to her own car.

But Myra spots Ponytail sitting behind the wheel of her car, window rolled down. She dashes over to ask, "Where did you hear that about the living arrows?"

"I don't know. I read it somewhere. Back in the Dark Ages, undergrad in religious studies. But it's stuck with me." She

turns over the engine and nods her head again as if to apologize that she has to leave. "Now you can use it."

Candace hasn't left yet. Inside her car she is checking her email. Myra taps on the window. "Hey, we can talk about this later?" She doesn't want to end their conversation so abruptly but honestly wants Candace to drop the idea, this misplaced energy. "And Candace, turn off the cell phone. Go get Jack, your living arrow before you send him off." Candace sets the phone down on the console near her seat. "You going to be okay?" Myra asks.

"I think so." Behind her words, Myra hears a crack. It could be this dust in the air, the pollen finding its way into the back of Candace's throat. Or, it could be the hurt she feels realizing that she doesn't have a project, that she will ride out this last year with Jack at home, her real project. Myra wishes she still had a teenage boy at home.

Just as Myra starts her car, her cell phone rings from inside her bag. How could this happen? The kid? *He probably knows more about cell phones at his age than she will ever understand.* It's only Richard. She powers it off.

